2. Villiers T-5 (1938-39) 1948 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2
Kuwait MI1

MA 471 426 565 When a deep-sea dhow is built, at least some of the money is put up by the *nakhoda* himself and his family. It is the first essential of the *nakhoda* that he should be from a family of standing in the community, which will pay its debts. Just why such families cannot finance a dhow by themselves I was unable to discover, but the Arab, apparently, has no objection to carrying on business under a cumbersome structure of debt. The merchant, backed by the Sheikh or the ruling family, backs the *nakhoda's* family, who support in turn a trusted and experienced member to take command of the dhow.

MA 565 871 857 It is customary for the boys in such families to go to sea while very young, but they never work as sailors. They are always privileged: no sailor can become a deep-sea *nakhoda*, since obviously if his family is of standing, he would never serve before the mast. The children sail with him sometimes from the age of six or seven, though not regularly. They will make one or two long voyages, looking on and learning but not actually doing anything; then they will remain at home a year or two before going out again. They take command very young. Schooling, at least in 1939, was normally restricted to the local Koranic schools, and rarely occupied more than three months in the year. Only merchants' sons went to the colleges of Iraq, Egypt, and Syria.

MA 545 854 505 Gradually the head of a *nakhoda's* family may attain the status of a lesser merchant himself, though his merchandise is generally limited to the wherewithal to build ships, which comes up in his own dhows from the Malabar coast. But a *nakhoda* himself almost never becomes a merchant, and a merchant's son never becomes a *nakhoda*. Nevertheless, the profession of conducting deep-sea dhows about the waters of the Indian Ocean is a highly respected one, and the shipmasters of Kuwait are, on the whole, a very competent and knowledgeable class, though few of them can practice much astronomical navigation. Even their long voyages down to Zanzibar or to Calicut are coasting, really down with one monsoon, and back with the other, almost always in sight of land. Their real ability consists in their local knowledge, both of ports and trade.

MA [187] K MA 505 546 In Kuwait, in 1939 — as now — there were upwards of 10,000 qualified deep-sea sailors. An astonishingly high proportion is of

4: Bowen C-5 (1950) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

The Dhow Sailor[1]

BY RICHARD LeBARON BOWEN, JR.

I

SINCE time immemorial, cargo has been transported in sailing ships up and down the South Arabian and the East African coasts. As the medieval Sinbads and the ancients before them had done for countless centuries, so are the Arabs, Indians, and Persians today transporting cargo in sailing ships up and down these same shores. Today these sailors operate the last great fleet of deepwater sailing ships in the world, and because of the special circumstances, this fleet will probably sail on for many more centuries oblivious to the changing pace of life around it. Life for these modern sailors has changed little in the thousand years that have passed since the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor were recorded in *The Thousand and One Nights*.

The Arabs, Indians, and Persians are still able to sail their fleets of

[1] Credit for this article belongs in large part to Mr. Frederick Hunt, who, after reading the author's 'Arab Dhows of Eastern Arabia' in THE AMERICAN NEPTUNE, wrote to the Editor and asked if a follow-up might be possible, 'telling something of actual life aboard a dhow, how the crew lives, watches they stand, living conditions, what they eat, their wages, etc.' Mr. Hunt's outline has been followed almost to the letter, with some additional material added to round out the study.

Shortly after the first draft of the article was finished, the writer was very fortunate to become a member of the American Foundation for the Study of Man Arabian Expedition, which conducted archaeological investigations in South Arabia during the winter of 1950. Almost a month spent at Aden and on the south coast of Arabia, enabled the writer to collect much valuable additional first-hand data on the life of the dhow sailor. The writer is indebted to Mr. Wendell Phillips, leader of the expedition, for his assistance in making this particular phase of the study possible. The writer is deeply grateful to Prof. W. F. Albright, vice-president of the American Foundation for the Study of Man, for his guidance and assistance in numerous details in the work. The writer is also indebted to Dr. Philip K. Hitti for valuable advice on certain points.

In doing any work on the subject of dhows, one must consult what Alan Villiers has written on the subject. By sailing with the Arabs on their dhows for almost a full year Mr. Villiers has obtained an intimate picture of the dhow that the casual observer will completely miss, or the serious worker may not be able to get, as the Arabs are rather suspicious of Europeans who investigate their activities too closely. The writer of this present article has drawn on Villiers' material to round out certain aspects of this article and to supply various facts and figures for which Villiers alone is the source. Most of such material has been taken from his entertaining book, *Sons of Sinbad* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), which in further reference will be abbreviated to A. Villiers, *SS*.

A description of the various types of dhows mentioned by their Arabic names in this article will be found in R. LeB. Bowen, Jr., 'Arab Dhows of Eastern Arabia,' AMERICAN NEPTUNE, IX (1949), 87-132, and R. LeB. Bowen, Jr., *Arab Dhows of Eastern Arabia* (Rehoboth: Privately printed, 1949).

4: Beaven C-5 (1960) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

lateen-rigged dhows, which operate in the main without the aid of engines, partly because of the amazing predictability of the monsoon trade winds. For millenniums the northeast monsoon has started unfailingly about October and blown for six months, until the southwest monsoon set in about April and continued for the next six months. By a strange coincidence, these winds blow virtually parallel to the South Arabian and East African coasts. The Arabs ride their lateeners down from the north on one wind and return on the other. So convenient is the arrangement that it is probably one reason why the fair-weather lateen rig has persisted for so many centuries on the deepwater dhows in the waters of the Indian Ocean.

The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (written by an anonymous Egyptian-Greek sailor in A.D. 50) tells us that the secret of the periodicity of the monsoons was discovered by Hippalus somewhat earlier and that 'from that time to the present day' ships bound for India from the Red Sea or South Arabia set a course 'straight out to sea.' It should be noted that Hippalus' find was a 'discovery' only from the Egyptian and the Greek point of view, as he discovered a secret that Indian and Arab mariners may have been carefully attempting to hide from Egyptian and Greek sailors. The original discovery of the fact that one could 'sail straight out to sea' and reach India from South Arabia, rather than by coasting, was more of a geographical than a meteorological discovery, for it was a realization of the southern projection of India (see Figure 1). Certainly no sailor in a sane mind would set a course 'straight out to sea' from South Arabia if he thought that the lands around the Erythraean Sea were oriented as shown in Figure 2.

The South Arabian kingdoms long maintained a monopoly of carrying the goods of the East via camel to the West. The Arabians collected the products of India and East Africa at the southern terminal of the famous incense route and sent these north, along with their own products, in huge camel caravans; the recipients in the north thought that all the products they received originated in South Arabia. Many writers have stated that the South Arabian kingdoms were doomed when the West discovered the secret of the periodicity of the monsoons. However, this writer feels that the monsoons had little to do with it; more important was the discovery that many of the coveted products thought to be indigenous to South Arabia actually originated in East Africa and India. After this fact was discovered, Greek and Roman shipping entered the Indian Ocean; in opening up trade with India and Africa they immediately started to slash the revenue of the South Arabians. It should be

487 noted that Western shipping could have successfully accomplished the same end by simply coasting, even if the direct southern route to India had never been discovered.

[102]/

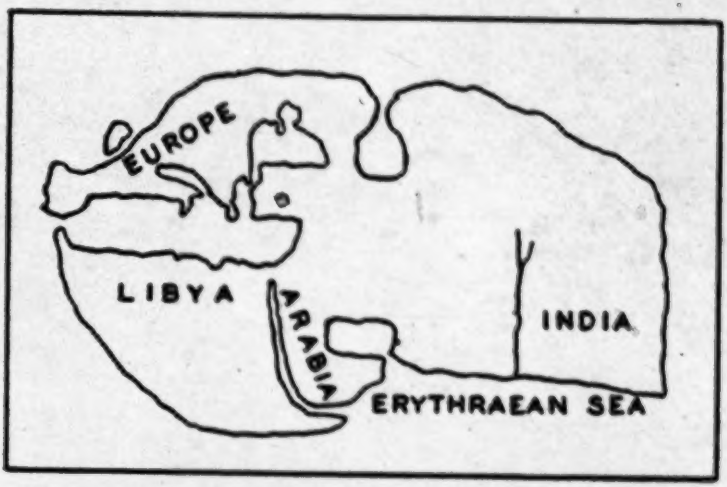

Fig. 2. The East as the ancient Greeks and Romans visualized it in the first century B.C. The map is constructed from distances and directions presented by the ancient geographers

It should also be emphasized that for the people inhabiting the coasts there was never any 'discovery' of the fact that the monsoon trade winds blew in one direction along the South Arabian and East African coasts for six months and then blew in the opposite direction for another six months; the people up and down these coasts knew it as a fact. Thus it was probably known to the Babylonians and Egyptians that the winds along the coasts in the Indian Ocean were subject to seasonal reversals. The Babylonians had organized sea trade as early as the twenty-third century B.C.

However, the fact that a ship could sail between India and Arabia directly, by a route shorter than the coasting route, had to be discovered. Whether it was the Indians or the Arabs who discovered this is not known; while we have a lack of reference to ancient Arabian shipping, there is considerable material referring to Indian shipping before the Christian era. A Buddhist record attributed to the fifth century B.C. relates that the sailors then used 'shore-finding birds' to find land.[2] They released the bird and, if it could not spot land, it returned to the boat;

[2] T. W. R. Davids, *Journal Royal Asiatic Society* (1899), p. 432.

4: Bowen C-8 (1950) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

however, if it sighted land, it headed straight for it, showing the sailors the direction of the nearest land. Certainly this would seem to indicate voyages of more daring than mere coasting voyages. There are numerous Sanskrit and Pali references to Indian trading voyages dating from about the third century B.C., and there is one Sanskrit manuscript containing a treatise on shipbuilding in ancient India, giving the sizes (ranging up to 260 feet in length) of dozens of types of ships.[2]

Zanzibar is the unofficial southern port for the lateen fleet sailing down from the north, although the Indians sometimes go on to Madagascar. Soon after the northeast monsoon has set in, lateen craft start to come into Zanzibar. Arabs come from the Persian Gulf ports of Basra, Kuwait, Bahrein, and Sharjah on the Trucial Coast of Oman; Persians send ships from the Persian Gulf ports of Bushire, Lingeh, Qishm, and Bandar Abbas. Arabs of the Oman ports of Sur and Muscat on the Gulf of Oman and Indians from the Gulf of Cutch and the Malabar coast all send dhows down to Africa. Arab craft also sail down from Aden and Mukalla in the Hadhramaut, while the Red Sea contributes its craft from Port Sudan, Massawa, and Hodeida. Even the Somali coast contributes to the fleet arriving at Zanzibar, with dhows coming down from Djibouti, Berbera, and Mogadiscio.

Kuwait is the largest maritime and dhow-building port in the Persian Gulf, with Bahrein a very poor second. While Bahrein cannot begin to compare with Kuwait from a maritime standpoint, it probably ranks ahead of the latter as an emporium in the Persian Gulf. It serves for all the entrepôt trade to the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, the goods coming into Bahrein in large dhows and being transshipped from Bahrein to Arabia in shallow-draft *jalbhuts* (see Plate 17—top). In 1939 Kuwait had 106 ocean-going *bhums* on the registry.[4] However, the majority of the Kuwait deepwater *bhums* sail to India, rather than to Africa, carrying dates from Basra. The mariners of Kuwait probably reached their present maritime status a little over a century ago. Palgrave traveled in the Persian Gulf in 1862-1863 and was much impressed with the maritime activity of Kuwait:

> Among all the seamen who ply the Persian Gulf, the mariners of [Kuwait] hold the first rank in daring, in skill, and in solid trustworthiness of character. Fifty years since their harbour with its little town . . . was a mere nothing; now it is the most active and the most important port of the northerly Gulf.[5]

[2] R. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping* (Bombay: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), p. 19.

[4] A. Villiers, "The Arab Dhow Trade," *Middle East Journal*, II (1948), 399.

[5] W. G. Palgrave, *A Year's Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia (1862-63)* (3rd ed., London: Macmillan and Co., 1866), II, 386.

4: Bowen C-5 (1950) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

cargo of fish if the local supply is not sufficient, and fish their way down the Arabian and African coast, selling fish wherever they can. Then they do the same thing on the way back. Mukalla is a favorite stopping place on the way down to Africa; I have seen dozens of *bedans* from Sur come into Mukalla and lay out their catch of shark or tuna on the beach to dry while they beached their dhows and put a coat of shark liver oil on their hulls (see Plate 18—top and bottom). Shark is a favorite Arab food; the flesh is cut off in strips or slabs and dried, while the liver is saved for its oil. The Arabs have little use for the tails or fins of the shark, but they are all meticulously saved and eventually find their way to China via India.

Thus these fish-bearing dhows from Oman start their trading venture from their home port, carrying a product of the port, and never carry other cargo; they trade fish from Sur to Zanzibar and back. For this trade they apparently always use the primitive *bedan*, usually ranging from fifty to sixty feet in length. The Suris export dates from Oman, or go to Basra for a cargo; when carrying dates they use large *sambuks* and *baghlas*.

In contrast to Arab and Persian ships which sail along the coasts the whole way, whether going to India or Africa, Indian vessels usually sail straight from India across the ocean for South Arabia or Africa with consignments of goods from Indian exporters at specific ports. Only rarely do they carry dates; their usual cargo consists of the products of India. From the Malabar coast they may carry coir rope stuffs, coir matting, teakwood, teak dugout canoes, coconuts, spices, cement, bricks, or tiles, while from Bombay they may pick up cotton piecegoods, groundnut oil, or tea. Most of the Indian ships that voyage to Arabia or Africa come from the Gulf of Cutch; few if any craft from Bombay or the Malabar coast carry this trade today.

In vivid contrast to the Arab date cargo and Indian cargo, which is usually on consignment, the replacement cargo for the rest of the voyage for the average Arab dhow is purchased by the *nakhoda* from the profit made on the date freight, for sale at the best market. After its date cargo has been discharged, the dhow becomes a trader in every connotation of the word, picking up and selling cargoes as she coasts south along the South Arabian and East African coast.

Sometimes the *nakhoda* may pick up a small cargo of partially spoiled dates to unload on the Africans; these the crew may wrap meticulously in fancy wrappers. At Aden the dhow may take on salt, sugar (from Java), rice (from Rangoon), canned goods, hardware, kerosene, or cotton goods and prints, and from the Hadhramaut coast the cargo may be dried shark

4: Bowen C-5 (1950) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

or other dried fish, *ghee* (clarified butter), honey, tobacco, grinding stones, and straw work (fans, mats, and baskets). It must be remembered that most of the cargo moving around the Middle Eastern waters in small vessels, whether dhows or small coastal steamers, is for the native trade and is destined for native bazaars, which are noted for the cheapness and poor quality of their wares. Once the dhow is loaded it is ready for the trip down the East African coast; however, the Arabs sometimes take a month or more to collect a full cargo.

Upon the *nakhoda* of the dhow rests the responsibility of getting another cargo for continuing down the African coast once the consigned date cargo is discharged. Invariably the *nakhoda* is the nominal owner of his dhow, so he acts as his own agent. As the cargo loaded after the dates are discharged is not on consignment, its selection is a matter of the *nakhoda's* judgment, with an eye to what will sell best in the African markets. However, a cargo that must be regarded as essentially on consignment is that of passengers. On some Africa-bound dhows passengers comprise a considerable portion of the cargo. The competition for passengers is very brisk, so that there is sometimes a race among the various *nakhodas,* who hasten to neighboring ports via motor launch as soon as their ships reach South Arabia to discharge their dates.

Through the dhows there is a constant flow of Arabs from South Arabia and Oman and of Indians from India. The immigrants usually become porters, hawkers, musicians, or beggars, but if they are very industrious, they may end up owning a small shop in the *suq*. Their usual aim in migrating is to work long enough so that they can go home after they save a little money; usually they never make enough to get out. Villiers[16] states that the Italian officials in Mogadiscio checked four thousand passengers on thirty-five dhows that were in the harbor when he was there in 1939. In 1937 the fare along the Hadhramaut coast between ports was three rupees.[17] In 1939 the fare from South Arabia to any African port was only eight rupees for men and twelve for women.[18] In Aden in 1950 the fare for natives traveling as deck passengers on A. Besse and Company dhows with no accommodations was 15 rupees to Berbera, Djibouti, and other ports about 150 miles from Aden; thirty rupees to Massaua, Mukalla, and ports about 450 miles away; and one hundred rupees to Jidda, Port Sudan, or ports approximately one thousand miles from Aden. These were fixed rates on the dhows operated by Besse; other dhows that

[16] A. Villiers, 'The Arab Dhow Trade,' *Middle East Journal*, II (1948), 404.
[17] F. Stark, *A Winter in Arabia* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1940), p. 313.
[18] A. Villiers, 55, p. 78.

4: Bowen C-5 (1950) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

difficult, if not impossible. When shipping out of a port, an Arab simply gets approval from the port police and moves his chest aboard. However, in Africa some ports will not allow passengers to discharge; to get around this, the Arab *nakhoda* sometimes obtains permission for shore leave for some of his passengers, and brings back a different group, who want to leave. Sometimes as much as twenty per cent of a passenger list of several hundred may be shifted in a port, but the dhow still leaves with a full complement, so everyone is happy.

Regulations are a challenge to the Arab, although some of his disregard for regulations may be classed as nothing less than pure thievery. Villiers[21] relates how a Persian dhow managed to load two hundred tons of salt stolen from the Italians at Haifun in 1939. The salt was successfully loaded at night from small canoes, but the dhow was apprehended just as it was ready to sail, and the *nakhoda* was thrown into jail.

III

Arab navigation, on the run from Arabia down the African coast or over to India, is little more than dead reckoning, and a poor brand at that. The only instrument the large Arab craft carries is a compass, which is assumed to give a true reading. Most Arabs have never heard of compass deviation and will not believe that a compass can give anything but a true reading. Besides a compass, the deep sea dhows sometimes carry a chart, which may be of surprisingly recent origin or of surprisingly ancient origin; Villiers[22] tells of once seeing an Arab pilot armed with a chart of the Indian Ocean corrected to 1746! A few Arabs carry Isa Kitamis' *Directory of Eastern Seas* in Arabic, which contains many useful descriptions of the landmarks which may be encountered.

However, as the Arab navigates, a 1746 chart and a faulty compass are ample for his needs, for he simply coasts along, usually in sight of land. Going down to Africa, he sails before the wind with land to starboard; returning he sails before the wind with land to port. The seas that he sails are like a book to him, and he seldom needs his chart; this is possible, as there are no reefs along the African way. When going to India the Arab proceeds in the same manner, coasting along. In going to Africa, the Arab may get out of sight of land while crossing the Gulf of Aden, but it is only a matter of a day or so, as the land is mountainous and high on both sides of the Gulf. In sailing the waters of the Persian Gulf, the dhow

[21] Ibid., p. 112.
[22] Ibid., p. 149.

4: Bowen C-5 (1950) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

is often out of sight of land, at least on the Arabian side, as the Arabian side is treacherous and the coast low and sterile.

A dhow sailing from the Persian Gulf to Africa or to India does not actually go at all out of the way by coasting, as a glance at a map will show. This practice of coasting has the added advantage of keeping the dhow within easy rowing distance of land in case the ship should go down, a possibility never overlooked.

In contrast to the Arabs and the Persians, the Indians still navigate their dhows over open ocean from India. However, a glance at the map will show the reason—craft from India would have to go far out of their way to coast to Africa in sight of land. Thus by necessity the Indians have maintained the knowledge of navigation that the Arabs and Persians had mastered so successfully in medieval times; being able to get along successfully by coasting their deepwater craft, the Arabs and Persians have lost the navigational knowledge which in medieval times brought them in contact with junks from China in the waters farther east. When the Arab has to sail a navigated course, he usually, though somewhat reluctantly, gets an Indian navigator. It is interesting to note that the ancient mariners in Greek and Roman times successfully navigated the southern route to India using only the sun and the stars; the mariners' compass was not invented until the Middle Ages.

There is one other alleged aid to navigation in the Indian Ocean that was known to the ancients. Niebuhr traveled from Arabia to India via dhow in 1763 and related that

> The passage between Arabia and India was formerly thought very dangerous. Ships were carried on by so rapid a current, that they could neither keep their reckoning, nor distinguish the coast during the rainy season: several were consequently lost on the low coasts of Malabar. These misfortunes have ceased to take place, since an observation was made, which has been thought new, although Arrian speaks of it being known to the ancients; in the Indian Ocean, at a certain distance from the land, a great many water serpents, from 12 to 15 inches in length, are to be seen rising above the surface of the water. When these serpents are seen, they are an indication that the coast is exactly two degrees distant. . . . We saw some of these serpents, for the first time, on the evening of the 9th of September; on the 11th we landed in the harbour of Bombay.[22]

On the run down to Africa the Arabs sail by night as well as by day; at night they make sure they are well out at sea and set a safe course by the compass. With its many reefs the Red Sea is an exception, for even local craft with a knowledge of the way anchor by night and sail by day

[22] C. Niebuhr, *Travels Through Arabia* (Edinburgh: R. Morison and Son, 1792), II, 373.

4: Bowen C-5 (1950) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

whenever they are near reefs. An exception to this is the slave-runner dashing from Africa to Arabia, for his activities are best carried on under cover of darkness. The reefs in the Red Sea are the main reason why foreign dhows do not venture very far into its waters.

In the field of navigation the Arabs are little impressed with Vasco da Gama's voyage, so famous in the West.[24] The Arabs take all the credit themselves; they claim that da Gama forced an Arab pilot to show him the way to India. Arab legend relates that an Ibn Majid, a famous pilot from the Persian Gulf, was delivered to da Gama by the Sheikh of Malindi (in present-day Kenya) as a hostage for stopping the siege of the town; the Arabs immortalize this Persian Gulf pilot and associate da Gama only with European intrusion into their territories.

The Arab dhow is actually not a very seaworthy craft (see Plate 19—top). It manages very successfully in fair weather, but in any kind of rough weather the dhow is likely to get into trouble fast. The *baghla* is apparently considerably less seaworthy than the *bhum*, as even Arab passengers (who are not particularly well informed about anything) prefer to travel in *bhums*.[25] Apparently the great transom stern of the *baghla* tends to make the craft unmanageable in heavy seas.

In the African port of Mombasa a Casualty Book listing all dhow casualties in the vicinity of the port shows that, while there were frequent accidents with small craft and less with larger craft, there was little loss of life.[26] This stems from the Arab's method of coasting close enough to land so that he can row ashore. However, no records list the number of dhows that have gone down with complete loss of life.

If the dhow springs a leak, it may often be disastrous. On a heavily-laden dhow the crew cannot get at the leak to repair it, and not having any pumps they do not even have time to start bailing. If they can get at it, the Arabs have been known to stop a leak where a plank was stove in by filling a cloth with rice, tying a string around the gathered neck and stuffing it in the hole; when the rice expands it fills the hole tightly.

Villiers[27] relates that a 178-ton Indian dhow loaded with mats sprang a leak and sank off Africa because the cargo prevented anyone from getting at the leak. The crew took fifteen minutes to clear the dhow, and very soon afterwards the sea was over her decks. The early English traveler Palgrave[28] had the same thing happen to him in 1863—an event which

[24] A. Villiers, *SS*, p. 197.
[25] Ibid., p. 106.
[26] Ibid., pp. 191-194.
[27] Ibid., p. 195.
[28] W. G. Palgrave, *Central and Eastern Arabia* (3rd ed., London: Macmillan and Co., 1866), II, 342 ff.